

# Joining the Debate: *Shouldn't Writing Teachers Write?*

by

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*This 1991 article by Tim Gillespie responds to Karen Jost's English Journal article, "Why High School English Teachers Should Not Write." By the act of creating this piece, Gillespie demonstrates a strong argument in support of his thesis: writing teachers should write. Gillespie teaches five classes a day and writes too.*

The March 1990 *English Journal* set off educational seismic waves by publishing an article, "Why High School Writing Teachers Should Not Write." This brief essay strikes at the heart of one of the National Writing Project's most cherished beliefs. The author, Karen Jost, a Wisconsin English teacher, has a serious gripe about the current conventional wisdom — and our Writing Project contention — that writing teachers ought to practice the craft we teach.

Jost's complaint is generally lobbed at folks in higher education, who have, she feels, passed down a Thou Shalt Write commandment from "the mountain heights of academia" to "those of us in the trenches — high school English teachers." Jost grouches about the imposition of this university publish-or-perish mentality on high school teachers who "have much less to gain professionally by writing."

The main impediment to writing, Jost declares, is lack of time. Most secondary English teachers, she writes, are far too busy to write. Her essay, with its I'm-mad-as-hell-and-I'm-not-going-to-take-it-anymore tone, sums up this way: "For the full-time high-school English teacher, writing is neither a realistic nor a professionally advantageous avocation" (Jost 1990a).

Jost's essay prompted what the editors said later was "the nearest thing to an avalanche that we at the *English Journal* have experienced" (Nelms, 1991).

Within two weeks, they noted, they had received more reader responses than they usually get in seven months. To spotlight these reactions, there was a 25-page follow-up forum in the September 1990 issue with letters pro and con and another essay by Karen Jost, "Why High School Writing Teachers Should Not Write, Revisited." In it, she reiterates her position, shares her own negative experiences writing in class with students, asserts that no "hard research" *proves* students write better in classrooms where the teachers write, and therefore concludes "the issue of writing teachers writing remains a case of one teacher's word against another's" (Jost, 1990b).

The debate was not finished. In the March 1991 *English Journal*, there was yet another round of responses: "Should Writing Teachers Write? The Conversation Continues." Twenty-one more letters were published, all from elementary and secondary classroom teachers, expressing a wide range of opinions. We may reasonably conclude, then, that this is an issue of great consequence and emotional import to a great many teachers.

So, what instruction can those of us involved with National Writing Project sites take from this high voltage discussion in the pages of the *English Journal*? And what is a useful response from the Writing Project, which has, after all, greatly helped to promote this apparently contentious notion of writing teachers writing?

To start with, we better not take any of our assumptions for granted. The *English Journal* debate is a reminder that not everyone agrees with our claim that writing teachers should write. Critical thinking must, of course, include self-criticism, and a healthy response is to challenge our own suppositions. One way in this case would be to copy Karen Jost's essays and all the resulting points and counterpoints, pass out all this material to NWP Summer Institute or coursework participants, and invite them to be part of the conversation. What do they think? Does their own experience with writing confirm or refute Jost's contentions? We want NWP sites to be models of the best kind of critical inquiry, and our own core beliefs are reasonable grist for such inquiry. In the *English Journal* exchange, we have a ready source of texts that scrutinize one of our cherished beliefs from a variety of viewpoints. We can use this interchange to challenge and provoke our thinking about the teaching of writing.

We would also be wise to examine the way we talk about our beliefs. Karen Jost appears to be offended by advice in the form of a "dictum" from people "cavalierly trying to add one more item onto the already loaded job descriptions of secondary teachers..." (Jost 1990a). Clearly, she perceives others to be forcing ideas on her using the language of prescription and judgment. We might consider offering advice in different forms. One model can be found in Donald Graves's recent *Reading/Writing Teacher's Companions* handbooks. The volumes in this series are *invitation* to teachers to examine Graves's ideas in the light of their own practices and experiences. The very titles reveal his rhetorical attitude: *Investigate Nonfiction* (Graves 1989b), *Experiment with Fiction* (Graves 1989a), and so forth. Graves has a clear point of view about the teaching of writing, but his ideas come across as something to chew over rather than as something that must be swallowed whole. The form of his argument honors teachers' prior experiences and incites reflection and experimentation. We might fruitfully examine the form of our own arguments. We want to invite conversation, not club folks over the head.

Most importantly, we need to offer good, understandable *reasons* for our belief that writing teachers ought to write. This seems self-apparent, but the job has evidently not been done. One disconcerting aspect of the *English Journal* brouhaha is that Karen Jost never offers in her two essays any possible reasons others might have for suggesting that writing teachers write,

other than as a university publishing obligation. "I don't know why you do it," she says to teachers, and she clearly doesn't (Jost 1990b). All one can conclude is that she may never have had any compelling reasons presented to her in a way she could hear. It behooves us to have good reasons, and to explain them well. Why *should* writing teachers write, anyway?

Here's where I am going to throw in my two cents' worth. I would like to suggest three reasons to add to all the other arguments of the *English Journal* colloquy.

First, when teachers write, we establish our own authority. Karen Jost's defensiveness ("... high school writing teachers should not, should not be obligated to, should not feel guilty if they don't write ...") and her strident tone toward the largely faceless abstraction she calls "the academics" reveals how disempowered she must feel. Her very language of hierarchy — "Don Murray and his friends ... on high" contrasted with us high school teachers "down here" — shows how much power she grants to university scholars such as Donald Murray (Jost 1990b). If *we* are "in the trenches," *they* must be the generals giving us commands, right? When high school teachers confer this undue amount of authority on college teachers, it shows a lack of confidence in our own classroom-based authority. Furthermore, those university folks then come to seem less like colleagues with ideas for us to talk about than superiors whose prescriptions we can only either accept and obey or reject and rebel against. Jost chooses the latter, which from her subordinate viewpoint seems quite sensible. Another choice would be for her to find ways to reclaim the power she seems to feel she has lost to academic authority figures, to cast off her language of submission and the attendant feelings of anger, guilt, and defensiveness. *Writing is one tool that can help her do this.*

I have regularly written during my career as a teacher, which includes three years of working with elementary students, ten years teaching high school, and now working at a county education office as a sort of traveling teacher. One motive for my writing is the insights I gain about teaching writing. I was surprised that Karen Jost railed against experts who urged her to write, since I have always viewed my own writing as my main defense *against* experts. My own experience as a writer inoculates me from any nonsense I might run across in the pronouncements on the teaching of writing by anyone — university scholars, consultants,

textbook writers, or authors of articles in *English Journal*. Practicing writing allows me to build my own expertise, against which I can weigh all those other opinions. I am thus not dependent on received knowledge; I also own the knowledge I have constructed for myself. Karen Jost views writing as acquiescence to authority; I view it as establishing my own authority.

As a related aside, I'd like to encourage elementary and secondary classroom teachers to join the fray, to be an integral part of this and all other educational debates. Karen Jost (and a number of the teachers who wrote to support her) expressed an unfortunate bias many K-12 teachers hold against college teachers. This divide does not serve students, nor learning, nor the teaching profession. Happily, our National Writing Project model, which attempts to pair university and public school teachers as co-instructors in our Summer Institutes, provides one example of a situation where teachers work together with equal stature and complementary perspectives. Whatever we do that undermines that cooperative partnership serves only to reinforce the you-versus-us hostility that Jost expresses. (Sites that have moved toward a directorship that represents higher education only might examine their set-up in light of this problem.) And all of us Writing Project directors, co-directors, consultants, or participants who are K-12 teachers need to open our mouths and uncap our pens and make sure we are heard — on this and all other issues.

A second reason for teachers writing is to expand our repertoire of useful responses to students. Our own experiences with the joys and struggles of writing give us personal insight into possible problems and strategies for dealing with those problems, as well as firsthand knowledge about approaches, disciplines, frustrations, shortcuts, dangers, delightful acts of authorial sleight-of-hand, and other tips and pitfalls of the craft. If we write and reflect on our writing regularly, we enlarge our capacity to respond to student compositions. We are not limited to error correction or boilerplate textbook advice, but can offer feedback or guidance from the wisdom we have gained from our own experience as writers (Gillespie, 1985).

Writing and sharing *in class* along with our students is particularly helpful in this regard, difficult as it is, as Karen Jost so eloquently points out. But there's no better way to understand classroom writing problems than to be in the same boat as the students, even if it's only

occasionally (and writing in class may be the easiest solution to the lament about a lack of time to write).

Perhaps the best example of the way our writing in class can be used to understand student confusions and clarify problems is Karen Jost's own explanation of her aborted attempts to write along with her students. She describes one of her frustrations: "If there was even a chance that I'd be reading my work out loud, I felt compelled to tailor it to my audience. This imposed a great constraint on my writing — particularly my freewriting" (Jost, 1990b).

This is precisely the kind of thought-provoking information that our own writing can offer us; it is rich data for inquiry into our teaching. For instance, Jost might ask herself that if *she* feels this way about writing, isn't it likely that some of her students will, too? So, how will she work with those particular youngsters? What if students faced with this situation do what Jost did — that is, choose not to write in class anymore? How will she deal with that? How did she resolve it for herself?

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And, what's "freewriting," anyway? What's it for and what's its purpose? If it is constrained by being read aloud, why would it need to be? Are there different purposes for different types of writing — some more personal and "free," perhaps, and some more public and tailored — that have been left unexplored with Jost's students?

And, what motivated her, a reluctant writer, to pen the original piece for *English Journal*? How could she replicate that motivation in her classroom? What caused her to produce such fine work when she obviously felt so put upon by the admonitions of authorities to write? How can she help any of her own students who might feel equally put upon by her admonitions to them to write?

And, perhaps the most difficult question of all, why are we teaching writing? If the message is that people with busy lives don't have the time or, more significantly, the need to write, why should we teach the

skill? If even a high school writing teacher doesn't want or need to write, who actually does? Is writing really a necessary skill for anyone? Who? Why?

Thoughtful examination of personal writing experiences, even the unsuccessful ones, can give us powerful insights as well as an expanded repertoire of responses. I have certainly found as many helpful ideas for addressing student or classroom writing problems by thinking about my own writing problems and processes as I have in the how-to books of writing experts that I've read. If Karen Jost regarded her own writing more seriously, she wouldn't have to take Don Murray so seriously. The "hard research" she seeks may be as close as her own writing pad and her own classroom.

A final reason for teachers writing has to do with our professionalism. A deep disappointment I have with Jost's essays is that they reinforce one of the most demeaning images with which teachers must contend, the popular notion that we don't really know much about anything, except perhaps a little pedagogy. This image is at the heart of widespread disrespect of our profession, yet Jost's articles are embarrassingly direct in asserting it. Imagine some snide journalist like Mike Royko or Patrick Buchanan or some school critic getting hold of the piece, "Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write." They would have a field day at our expense. Imagine the satiric extensions ad nauseam: "Why Swimming Teachers Should Not Swim," "Why Reading Teachers Should Not Read," et cetera. Jost's attitude feeds those who nod their heads at George Bernard Shaw's ugly little aphorism that "Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach."

There is a norm of demonstration that helps establish educational professionalism: Violin teachers demonstrate to their students how to move the bow, shop teachers show how to work the drill press, and pottery teachers throw pots — all as part of their regular classroom routines. We would expect no less of them. When we writing teachers write and share our work with students, we are asserting ourselves as equally professional. The idea is not that we need to publish, any more than the violin teacher needs to play in the local symphony orchestra or the pottery teacher needs to have a yearly show at the art gallery (though those accomplishments certainly add stature to those individuals and to our profession). We just need to be able to demonstrate to our pupils, to their parents, and

to the tax-paying citizenry that we can do what we ask our students to do, and that our advice and instruction is therefore not just secondhand. Forcefully asserting that writing teachers should not write is feeding a public perception of teachers as mediocrities — and proud of it, yet.

In the final analysis, though, Karen Jost's message and medium don't match. If this is truly a case of "one teacher's word against another's" (Jost 1990b), which word of hers do we believe — her argument, or her act of writing it? She has caused a heated national debate by her passionate writing ... about *not* writing! She has modeled her argument's antithesis — or, perhaps more accurately, she is the best argument against her own thesis. She can write. She does write. She inspires others to write in response to her. And thus she represents all teachers well, because she has demonstrated to her students and her community that she practices what she preaches in class. She is a teacher who *can do*, a writing teacher who is a real writer. She thus brings honor to herself and to the teaching profession.

So why on earth tell the rest of us not to write? I say, sharpen your pencil, uncap your pen, let your computer hum. Writing and teaching are seamless work.

## References

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## Afterword

I have a new teaching job this year: five periods of high school English (three different courses, all new to me) with 148 students, all seniors. The load feels hefty — months of new curriculum to plan, stacks of papers wanting response, piles of college essays I've offered to read. Plus I'm advising the school literary magazine and teaching a college class one night a week. This is work I love, but some days it makes my back tired. I also have a life outside of school as father, homeowner, and citizen, with joys and demands I split with a wife who also teaches. So, what am I saying? Nothing unique: I'm a typical teacher, parent, and middle class American, circa the end of the 20th Century — Busy, Committed, Obligated. So what?

So, as I look back on the article I wrote in 1991, I am still sympathetic to Karen Jost's lament. No doubt about it. If we aspire to be good teachers and people, we're working mighty hard, and no one who's working hard particularly enjoys hearing something that might sound like a tongueclucking version of, "You ought to be doing *more*, you know."

I keep this in mind when I revisit the question, "Should high school English teachers write?" I don't like the loaded prescriptive word *should*, so I'll rephrase it: Is the investment of time in writing worth the return for us as time-pressed teachers? I still have to say, emphatically, *yes*. If and when we can manage it, writing offers us many benefits.

I would like to mention three that I didn't put in my original manifesto.

First, the activities of writing and teaching are mutually instructive and reinforcing. The two crafts require many of the same kinds of energies and qualities: paying attention, listening carefully, dancing a tightrope between creativity and discipline, using language well. As writers *and* as teachers, we

set a plan, launch into it, watch what develops, wait to catch the shape of things, and endlessly revise. Perhaps these similarities are why it is so difficult at times to contemplate doing both; they draw a similar kind of energy. But getting better at one helps me get better at the other, I believe. The differences between the two crafts are also informative. Writing offers me a model of thoughtful contemplation, which my teaching definitely needs. And the liveliness of teaching stirs up the quiet of my writing desk, reminding me that life is teeming with complex, nettlesome and delightful characters, some of whom I will understand and some not at all. In other words, what I learn about teaching helps me be a better writer. And what I learn about writing helps me be a better teacher.

Second, in the midst of the latest round of noisy debates about the educational endeavor, one voice seems too often missing: the classroom teacher. The headlines blare controversies about school violence, vouchers and charter schools, school prayer, SAT scores, funding dilemmas, and struggles over standards, curriculum control, and multiculturalism. In the midst of this din, someone needs to be bearing witness to the actual life, the difficulties, challenges, pleasures, and truths of teaching today. People make all kinds of claims about schools, but we are living the experience, and we should be telling the story. The abstractions of policy arguments need to be put in terms of the names and faces of actual young people who will be beneficiaries or victims of our decisions. By our writing as teachers, we can become part of the conversation about education and help ensure that the discussion is honestly grounded in the classroom.

The third reason for writing? As I once heard writing teacher Donald Graves say, why should the kids have all the fun?